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RUEHDBU/AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE 0861
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 4571
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 2862
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C O N F I D E N T I A L TASHKENT 001138

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TAGS: [PHUM KIRF](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SOCI](#) [UZ](#)

SUBJECT: UZBEKISTAN: PROTESTANT RELEASED; ACTIVIST GRANTED
EXIT VISA

REF: A. TASHKENT 947

[1](#)B. TASHKENT 313

[1](#)C. TASHKENT 1036

Classified By: POLOFF R. FITZMAURICE FOR REASONS 1.4 (B, D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: In the past week, Uzbek authorities have dropped religious extremism charges against Protestant Aimurat Khayburahmanov and issued an exit visa for human rights activist Mutabar Tojiboyeva to receive medical treatment abroad. Forum 18, which first reported Khayburahmanov's release, also reported that several Imams and Muslims have been recently arrested by Karakalpak authorities, but we believe these claims are less credible, though we will continue to investigate them. In addition, several human rights activists in Jizzakh province reported that local authorities have refused to issue them exit visas this year, while a German diplomat reported hearing rumors that the Uzbeks were planning to scrap their exit visa regime. The government's decision to drop charges against Khayburahmanov and issue an exit visa to Tojiboyeva are small but positive steps that appear aimed at placating U.S. and EU officials respectively. End summary.

CHARGES DISMISSED AGAINST PROTESTANT IN KARAKALPAKSTAN...

[1](#)2. (SBU) On October 6, a representative of the Bishop Evangelical Union Church headquarters in Tashkent confirmed a September 30 article on the Forum 18 website, which reported that authorities in Uzbekistan's Karakalpakstan Autonomous Republic have dismissed charges against church member Aimurat Khayburahmanov. On September 26, Nukus City Criminal Court Judge Yelena Medetova dropped religious extremism charges against Khayburahmanov and amnestied him on the remaining charges of teaching religion without official approval (Note: Uzbek authorities announced another amnesty in honor of Uzbekistan's Independence Day on September 1. This is the first case we know of authorities dismissing charges against a defendant under the September amnesty. End note).

13. (SBU) U.S. officials, including Ambassador-at-Large for Religious Freedom John Hanford, had raised concern over Khayburahmanov's case with Uzbek officials. In addition, poloff traveled to Karakalpakstan in August to meet with the Bishop of Khayburahmanov's church (Ref A).

...BUT IMAMS ARRESTED IN KARAKALPAKSTAN?

14. (C) The same Forum 18 article also reported that two Imams in Karakalpakstan were arrested on corruption charges and that another was arrested on drug charges over the past few months. The article quotes former Human Rights Watch staffer Umida Niyazova as stating that she had received reports that "about 30 Imams had been arrested in Karakalpakstan." Quoting unnamed sources in Karakalpakstan, the article further reports that "over 50 Muslims" have been arrested in the region's Turkkul district for reading works by Al-Bukhari, Uzbekistan's most famous Islamic scholar, and former (and still influential) Mufti Muhammad Sodiq. Erk opposition member Dilorom Ishakova, who has been monitoring the ongoing trials in Karakalpakstan of human rights activist Akzam Turgunov and journalist Salidjahon Abdurakhmanov, told poloff recently that she had met a woman outside one of the courtrooms who claimed that her relative and "approximately 50 other Muslims" had been recently arrested on religious extremism charges (Comment: Ishakova did not have any other details regarding the arrests, but it is possible that she is one of the sources of the Forum 18 article. End comment.)

15. (C) Comment: We will look into the alleged arrests of the Imams and Muslims, but we are unable to confirm anything so far. Imams have been previously accused of corruption by their congregation members, so it is not out of the question that the Imams were arrested due to legitimate corruption concerns. For example, on October 2, several human rights activists in Syrdarya province complained to poloff of lodging several complaints with local authorities over the years regarding a corrupt Imam in their region, who reportedly received bribes for recommending individuals for government-sponsored trips to perform the Hajj in Mecca. The activists were upset that local authorities had not yet prosecuted the Imam and requested we intervene.

16. (C) Comment continued: Some of the other allegations in the Forum 18 article also appear exaggerated, including Niyazova's claim that 30 Imams had been arrested (the article notes that that Karakalpakstan only has a total of about 50 Imams). Niyazova is also quoted as stating that she "was forced to leave (Uzbekistan)," even though former Human Rights Watch Tashkent director Igor Vorontsov previously told poloff that Niyazova was leaving Uzbekistan to take part in a year-long HRW fellowship program. The claim that over 50 Muslims were arrested for reading works by Al-Bukhari and Sodiq is also highly doubtful. The government frequently touts Al-Bukhari and his works as an example of Uzbekistan's rich Islamic heritage. One government-controlled organization, the Al-Bukhari Fund, supports projects to publicize Al-Bukhari's works. Poloff also recently visited Al-Bukhari's mausoleum outside of Samarkand, which the government spent significant funds to renovate over the past decade. During their last meeting, Sodiq told poloff that authorities permitted him to hold a weekly radio talk show and distribute his writings through his website and pamphlets (ref B). In general, Forum 18's reporting has been reliable on Uzbekistan's Protestant community, but less so on its Muslim community. Forum 18 has sources among the local Protestant community, but it seems to rely mostly on the reporting of local human rights and opposition activists, whose reliability on this issue is not always certain, for reporting on Muslims. End comment.

KARAKALPAKSTAN TRIALS CONTINUE FOR ACTIVIST AND JOURNALIST

17. (C) According to Ishakova, court trials in Karakalpakstan are continuing for Turgunov and Abdurakhmanov with frequent

interruptions (ref C). Ishakova told poloff on September 21 that authorities delayed Turgunov's trial so that investigators could look into allegations that police tortured Turgunov while he was in pre-trial detention by pouring boiling water on his back. Ishakova reported to poloff that she was in the courtroom when Turgunov removed his shirt to show his burns, which she said were extensive. Ishakova expected both trials to resume in the first half of October.

HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST MUTABAR TOJIBOYEVA GRANTED EXIT VISA

¶8. (C) Margilan-based human rights activist Mutabar Tojiboyeva was released from prison on medical grounds (but not amnestied) on June 2, during the visit of SCA Assistant Secretary Boucher, after spending more than two and half years in prison on politically-motivated charges (ref C). On October 6, Tojiboyeva confirmed internet news reports that she had been granted an exit visa to seek medical treatment abroad. Authorities had previously granted Tojiboyeva permission to travel from Margilan to Tashkent to undergo medical tests for a still undiagnosed illness. Both the French and German Embassies have focused on Tojiboyeva's case in an effort to secure her travel to Europe for medical treatment.

ACTIVISTS IN JIZZAKH STILL WAITING FOR EXIT VISAS...

¶9. (C) Authorities still appear reluctant to issue exit visas to other human rights activists. During a meeting in Jizzakh on September 26, four local human rights activists - Saida Kurbanova, Odil Razzakov, Uktam Pardeyev, and Mamur Azizov - complained that local authorities have refused to issue them exit visas since February. According to the activists, the local authorities have not offered an explanation for the delay (Note: Exit visas are supposed to be issued within a month, but delays are common. End note.)

UZBEKS TO ABOLISH EXIT VISA SYSTEM?

¶10. (C) German political officer Uwe Berndt reported to poloff hearing rumors that Uzbek authorities were planning to abolish the exit visa regime as of January 2009. According to the rumors, the government would replace exit visas with international passports. Its citizens would have to apply for the new international passports, and their current passports would be used for domestic purposes only. Berndt could not vouch for the credibility of the rumors.

COMMENT

¶11. (C) The government's decision to drop charges against Khayburahmanov and issue an exit visa to Mutabar Tojiboyeva are small but welcome steps forward on religious freedom and human rights. The issuance of an exit visa to Tojiboyeva most likely is intended to placate the EU, which has closely followed her case and will issue a decision on whether to prolong or reduce sanctions against Uzbekistan on October 13. Tashkent-based EU diplomats have reported that they expect the EU will decide to reduce sanctions against Uzbekistan by eliminating or shortening a visa ban list against selected Uzbek officials, but most likely will decide to keep an arms embargo in place. The decision to drop charges against Khayburahmanov, however, is most likely the result of efforts by U.S. officials, most of all Ambassador-at-Large for Religious Freedom John Hanford, who raised Khayburahmanov's case directly with Uzbek officials (the EU has generally not focused on the cases of detained Protestants.) While the Uzbeks have so far backed away from their stated desire to sign an agreement with Hanford on steps to improve religious freedom, the decision to drop charges against Khayburahmanov suggests that they are still interested in continuing some type of dialogue on these issues.

